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# Disaster in the Pacific: New Light on the Battle of Savo Island

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falsely optimistic assessment of damage to the Japanese was this: it restored the U.S. Navy's morale that had been deeply depressed by Savo Island.

Captain Hoover won the Navy Cross, but the citation made no mention that he had opened fire without authorization. It was a brilliant blunder.

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Warner, Denis; Warner, Peggy; with Seno, Sadao. *Disaster in the Pacific: New Light on the Battle of Savo Island*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 298pp. \$26.95

In the early hours of 9 August 1942, a Japanese cruiser-destroyer group attacked and defeated a numerically superior force of American and Australian units that had provided cover for the Allied landings in the Solomon Islands. The Japanese success was a deep shock to the Allied navies, who had underestimated both the Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) proficiency at night fighting and its willingness to take risks to achieve tactical surprise. Misjudgments over threat assessments, a lack of group tactical training (particularly in night fighting), and the weariness amongst personnel resulting from many days spent closed-up in action stations had made the Allied ships vulnerable. In the course of the battle, four heavy cruisers were sunk and other units were damaged by the Japanese with little loss to themselves.

Several areas of controversy still remain in the wake of the action off

Savo Island, and Denis and Peggy Warner have attempted to produce a comprehensive treatment of that action and settle the points in dispute. Their narrative focuses particularly on the warning given to the naval forces by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Hudson reconnaissance bomber scouting aircraft, who have been accused of failing to pass to the proper commands, and with the appropriate priority, the sighting reports of the Japanese forces they had made the previous day.

The Warners have devoted considerable space to the activities of the Hudsons. Their narratives of this element and of the battle proper indicate lengthy research of the battle reports and a clear intent to let the witnesses to the action speak clear. Their laudable inclusion of the Japanese element, with the help of Commander Sadao Seno, is further evidence of their attempt to provide a complete record.

*Disaster in the Pacific*, however, suffers from structural problems that seem to be the result of inadequate

editorial supervision and the lack of a sufficiently profound understanding of naval warfare. The introduction attempts to treat the core of the battle *in medias res*, which establishes the pattern of an episodic approach that is sometimes disjointed and often repetitious. Furthermore, the wholesale recital of firsthand accounts of the battle only increases the impression of discontinuity, and the jumble of terminology and timings makes the narrative difficult to follow.

It is far from easy to marry the accounts of men from four navies (if one includes the British personnel present) into a coherent whole when discussing the progress of a desperately confused battle—but more could have been done. The Japanese component, in particular, would have benefited greatly from revision to help cast the narrative and the reported conversations into terms less artificial (and superficial) to a Western eye. In both this area and in that of maps, there are signs of undue haste on the part of the publishers. Old Japanese and Australian charts have been reproduced instead of newly drawn syntheses of the judgments reached by the Warners.

The Warners' attempt to provide the "last word" on the battle is unsuccessful for reasons that call into question their rationale for reassessments of the operational and tactical aspects of the Second World War at sea. Their understanding of and sympathy with the problems of the high command, and their equal interest in the sailor at the gun, are not duplicated in the

operational aspects. Much, for example, is made of the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) distrust of the professionalism of RAAF aircraft and the value of their reports, but there is little discussion of the difficulties that existed when trying to identify ships at sea from the air. Nor is there much discussion about the lack of formal training in maritime work for the RAAF, or about the very chequered record of all reconnaissance aircraft (of whatever service) in the harsh environment of war from 1939 onward. Similarly, the authors' inclusion of the signals intelligence element does not give sufficient space to the problems of using information derived from sources of this nature. The Allies were certainly able to build up a fairly complete picture of Japanese warship dispositions, but examination of the daily summaries (this reviewer has read those in the Layton collection at the Naval War College) shows that it remained incomplete. Signal intelligence was better at indicating trends than details, and it could only be a small element in assessing the likelihood of surface intervention in the Guadalcanal operation.

Errors such as the underestimation of Japanese night-fighting techniques are criticised in hindsight without any indication of possible plausible reasons.

Too, other criticisms are made without sufficient consideration of the alternatives. The Allied dispositions are decried because of how they divided the available strength. Concentration of force is indeed the key

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to night fighting, but the extent to which that force can be concentrated is a function of the visibility and of the ability of the units concerned to communicate effectively. The difficulties of command at night increase exponentially as the number of ships increases.

Much is said about the failure of radar, but the authors offer little space to its contemporary deficiencies or to the possible variants in radar fits. *Canberra* had recently been fitted with Type 271 radar—but of what mark? Did she have automatic aerial rotation, or was this done by hand? Had *Canberra* been fitted with a Plan Position Indicator (PPI) display? Had any USN ships? What types of radar did the Americans carry? The authors do mention that *Canberra* made a detection at sixty thousand yards, but the context is unclear. Was this the detection of the Japanese force itself or had it been a “best case” detection of known Allied units earlier in the day? The questions run on.

This is not to say that *Disaster in the Pacific* neglects to make some good points. The lack of “battle mindedness,” of which Rear Admiral Richard Kelly Turner, USN, later complained, was the real, final cause of the Allied failure and is especially well illustrated by the mass of survivors’ testimony and the progress of events they retail. The point is that to attempt a “new look” at the Second World War at sea, if it is to produce anything of value, requires considerable technical and tactical expertise as well as the exhaustive research efforts

made by the authors. The weight of material on the 1939–45 naval war awaiting treatment is considerable, both inside and outside official archives. However, it can only be offered as useful evidence when it has been examined in context.

In a historiographic sense, context is created by the deep understanding that can only result from a long and profound acquaintance with the mechanics of the subject under examination. If the value of *Disaster in the Pacific* as a new publication is judged by the extent that it enhances our understanding of the events at Savo, it fails the test.

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Feifer, George. *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992. 622pp. \$29.95

George Feifer tells us that *tennozan* means a single battle on which a ruler stakes his fate. This book then is misnamed. The battle for Okinawa, from April to June 1945, did not decide the outcome of World War II, nor the fate of either Japan or the United States. It was a horrendous mass killing, but both the battle and the American victory there were inevitable. Okinawa was one more giant step in the stepping-stone strategy that required American Marines and soldiers to assault and seize a seemingly endless string of Pacific islands, which